

HOW COMMUNISTS SABOTAGE AGRARIAN REFORM

Perhaps the most pressing problem in the less developed countries of Latin America is agrarian reform. Although the problem exists in other areas of the world, the principal examples that follow have been taken from Latin America because there the problem is most explosive and the Communists have substantially contributed to prevent the governments from making any real progress.

Unlike the United States during the period when the population was largely rural, there is a dearth of new tillable land. A Chilean poet has described South America as "una geografia loca" -- geography gone mad. Immense areas of mountain, desert, steppe, and jungle are not suitable for agriculture at all, and others can be brought into cultivation only at great expense, far beyond the reach of the small farmer. The tropical rain forest of the Amazon basin, once thought to have great agricultural potential, is now looked upon by economic geographers as one of the world's great deserts.

Therefore, in the rural areas of Latin America, in the very places where people would normally be expected to have enough to eat, even if they lacked other necessities, the highest incidence of malnutrition and actual starvation are to be found.

Contrary to what might be expected in view of the sparse /though rapidly increasing/ population per square mile, the foregoing geographic factors serve to explain why Latin America has a food-deficit. More important, it is getting worse. According to recent statistics from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, all the major areas of the world have increased their output of grain per person during the last 30 years -- from 5% to 51% per person -- except Asia and Latin America, where it was down 2% and 16% respectively.

One of the factors that make agrarian reform an explosive issue in many countries is the existence of so many starving, or near-starving, peasants in close proximity to enormous estates, owned by wealthy families, sometimes operated by overseers for absentee landlords. In many cases, such land is prudently grazed by high-bred cattle of scientifically cultivated for a cash crop like sugar or cotton. To divide up these prosperous enterprises and dole them out to peasants who have neither the know-how nor the equipment to operate them would lower the overall production of both foodstuffs and foreign exchange earners.

In relatively few cases have governments been able to find more than a partial solution to the problem and not too many have tried hard enough. Moreover, there is not enough suitable land, or enough money with which to buy it, or facilities for training peasants to be independent farmers. In general land-owners have resisted land reform and closed their eyes to mounting pressures. Some governments, however, are making an effort. In Venezuela, for example, 40,000 peasants have been settled on land bought and paid for by the government.

Elsewhere, there is less cause for optimism. In Peru, an agrarian reform bill has recently been passed which, viewed realistically, gives only small hope of success. Mexico's agrarian reform of a generation and more ago has been largely nullified by increase in population, deterioration of the soil, and lack of incentive for individual effort. Brazil has a problem commensurate with the magnitude of its area and population.

In these three countries -- Brazil, Mexico, and Peru -- Communist organizers have embarked on an intensive campaign of agitation, not to satisfy the peasants' revindications, but rather use them as a political force and to incite them to seize by force land to which they have no claim. This has brought about a series of clashes between the forces of law and order and bands of land-hungry peasants, sometimes involving loss of life on both sides.

In Brazil, violence has been slight compared with the large numbers of peasants actually organized and Communist-led. The most spectacular activity has been carried on by the Peasant Leagues (Ligas Camponesas), principally in the Northeast. Originally organized in 1957, they were taken over in 1959 by Francisco Juliao, a radical lawyer with Castroite connections who is for bloody revolution as the only means to bring about change. Juliao made frequent trips to Cuba, received arms and cash from Castro, burned a few cane fields, and for a time was almost in open revolt against the government. In October, 1962, he was elected federal deputy from Pernambuco, which gave him parliamentary immunity. After the military coup which overthrew President Joao Goulart, Juliao went into hiding, but has since been arrested in spite of his parliamentary immunity.

Less spectacular but more powerful is the Union of Agricultural Workers of Brazil (ULTAB), led by the dominant, or pro-Moscow, fraction of the Communist Party (PCB -- Partido Comunista do Brasil). When the party decided to develop peasants as a political force, they split with Juliao. ULTAB claims over half-a-million members in 450 organizational units, as compared with Juliao's claims of 80,000. Both figures are thought to be exaggerated. The recent creation of a number of Catholic peasant organizations in Brazil is cause for some optimism as a prevailing force.

In Mexico, agrarian reform has again become an issue. Starting some fifty years ago, the revolutionary government seized large cattle ranches and split them up into ejidos, or communal plots, patterned on the pre-Columbian system of collective agriculture. According to most neutral observers, lack of individual incentive was the principal cause of the failure of Mexico's agrarian reform. Even those who were given small individual holdings, do not own them outright. Under the Mexican constitution, all land ultimately belongs to the "nation," that is, to the government in power. Hence there is not a complete incentive to invest in land improvement.

At the time that land reform was carried out in Mexico, certain large productive ranches, or haciendas, were granted concessions of indefeasibility, that is, they were not affected by the agrarian reform law; they were exempt from expropriation. Now the ejidos and small individual plots have worn out or are no longer sufficient to meet the needs of the population. The landless, or "surplus," peasants (Mexico has always had a surplus population, even in the time of the Aztecs) are eyeing the large ranches, some over 100,000 hectares (250,000 acres) in size. But the largest ranches are found in the greatest drought areas and form self-contained agricultural units. They usually represent a careful balance of such factors as water supply, grazing area, number of cattle, and are more valuable to the economy of the country as large, than as small, units.

Peasant violence in Mexico began to increase in late 1963, especially in the northern and eastern states of Chihuahua, Nuevo Leon, and Tamaulipas. It has usually taken the form of invasions of private lands by groups of several hundred men, women, and children led by Communist or leftist agitators. The Mexican Army, which is charged with maintaining order in such cases, has so far succeeded in ejecting the squatters with a minimum of bloodshed. The most active elements in this agitation are members of the Communist-line Partido Popular Socialista (PPS) of Vicente Lombardo Toledano.

In Peru, the Indian communities of the high mountain valleys, where most of the country's population live, are spreading into privately owned land with an elemental force that challenges the capacity of the government to maintain order. As a result of worn-out land, occasional droughts, unseasonable freezes, and over-population, famine conditions have existed intermittently for many years in the Sierra. Most of the large stock farms are situated at altitudes of 10,000 to 14,000 feet, and sometimes separated from centers of governmental authority by almost impassable mountain barriers. This inviting situation, has led to hundreds of invasions of private land in the past five years, each one involving a violent clash with the Guardia Civil or the army.

In a typical instance, a community of 500 to 1,000 Indians, including women, children will occupy a privately owned grazing area with their scrubby livestock. The owners of the land, in panic, send word to the nearest Guardia Civil post but when the police arrive, perhaps a dozen strong, they are met with a force that outnumbers them fifty to one. If the squatters attack with stones and slings and sometimes firearms while the police use tear gas, sabers, and finally their pistols. Such skirmishes always result in casualties and usually several deaths, frequently a woman or a child, since they are normally put in the vanguard of such a band.

More recently, violence has spread to the rice, sugar and cotton plantations on the coast. In mid-January, according to a UPI despatch, an estimated 30,000 Communist-led squatters occupied 17 cotton plantations along the Piura river in northern Peru and, for a time, defied efforts of 220 police of the Guardia Civil to evict them. On approximately the same date, back in the sierra, 12,000 campesinos (Indian peasants) paraded and held a mass meeting in Cuzco. Their speakers threatened to kill all landowners.

At the core of each such group is a Communist, or at least a literate Indian peasant carefully trained in agitation. The agitator is frequently a lawyer from one of the larger towns of the sierra, who adds a rational dimension to the peasant's cause. The land, he will say, rightfully belongs to the Indian community: it was stolen by its present occupants 100 years ago, or by the Spaniards 400 years ago! This is complicated by the fact that in Peru, as well as in other parts of Latin America, there is no satisfactory system for granting clear titles to land. Even where legal title is backed up by possession over a period of a generation or more, faith in the impartial administration of justice is so low that some people feel justified in taking the law into their own hands.

Elsewhere in the world, Communists have been less successful in exploiting land reform to their own subversive ends. In India, the Nehru government was able to eliminate the zamindari system, a method of land tenure inherited from the British administration. Approved For Release 2001/08/08 : CIA-RDP78-03061A000300010014-4 Series of

lessees and sublessees. Now the peasant has more permanent tenure and pays taxes directly to the government. In Japan, a successful agrarian reform program was put into effect quickly after World War II, during the U. S. military occupation. In Taiwan, the problem of payment for expropriated land was solved by issuing twenty-year bonds tied to the price of two principal commodities and to stock in government-owned industries. The landlord was thus assured that future payment for his land would not be in worthless, inflated currency. More recently, the Shah of Iran sponsored a series of laws that combined to bring about what has been called the "white revolution" (Iran's "White Revolution" Biweekly #129, 18 Nov 63). The most important and successful aspect of this legislation was that concerned with breaking up the enormous holdings of feudal-type landlords and forming peasant cooperatives. A measure of the magnitude of this agrarian reform is the cost: some \$930 million.

All of the above agrarian reform programs have been successful because they were carried out in the absence -- total or partial -- of any Communist agitation [except for India]. Where the Communists become concerned with helping the landless peasant, they exploit the issues to their own ends and so exacerbate antagonisms between the haves and the have-nots that true reform becomes difficult or impossible.